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Source Publication:
M.M. Karlsson, O.P. Jonsson. and E.M. Brynjarsdottir (eds.), Law, Justice and the State. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993.

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Sonderdruck aus:

RECHTSTHEORIE

Zeitschrift für Logik, Methodenlehre
Kybernetik und Soziologie des Rechts

Beiheft 15

Recht, Gerechtigkeit und der Staat

Studien zu Gerechtigkeit, Demokratie, Nationalität, nationalen Staaten und supranationalen Staaten aus der Perspektive der Rechtstheorie, der Sozialphilosophie und der Sozialwissenschaften

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Studies in Justice, Democracy, Nationality, National States, and Supra-national States from the Standpoints of Legal Theory, Social Philosophy, and Social Science

Herausgegeben von / Edited by

Mikael M. Karlsson / Ólafur Páll Jónsson / Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir

Vorwort von / Preface by

Mikael M. Karlsson

Duncker & Humblot · Berlin

TRANSCENDING COMMUNITY
SOME THOUGHTS ON HAVEL AND BERGSON

Brian Slattery, York, Ontario

> "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics. What really matters is that mysticism not be devoured by politics to which it gave birth."
>
> Charles Peguy

> "The truth is I never really cared that much about politics. ... To me, reality is forests, children, especially dogs — these are things that seem to me to be the closest to what the universe is about."
>
> Bruce Hutchison

As a young boy growing up in the largely Francophone city of Montreal, I attended a local boys' primary school that was divided into two sections, French and English. Although students in these sections shared the same building and the same school-yard, we shared little else. We had separate classes, separate teachers, and even separate entrances, located at each end of the school. The first lesson a new boy learned, if he valued his skin, was to respect the Frontier. This unmarked boundary divided the school-yard into two roughly equal territories — French and English — radiating out from the separate entrances. As far as I remember, the Frontier was a spontaneous creation of the boys themselves. In fact, I have the impression that the teachers were not fully aware of the boundary; at least they did not police it. However the Frontier was enforced in a spirited way by students on both sides. It was well-known that if an English kid ventured into French territory, or vice-versa, he was "fair game" and liable to have the stuffing pounded out of him.

So, a primordial feature of my small world at this stage was a "natural" division of the school-yard between "us" and "them", "English" and "French", a division ignored at one's peril. As I recall, we did not think that the French kids were inferior to us. To the contrary, they were respected as tough and resourceful fighters. Nor, for that matter, did we suppose that the French considered us inferior. For us, they were simply "the others", the ones on the other side of the Great Divide, and we were "the others" for them. The normal rules that protected students (more or less) from being pummelled by

their school-mates simply did not apply to the "others" when they ventured into our territory. Nor did we expect any better if we strayed onto the wrong side of the invisible line. To us, this situation was neither fair nor unfair; it was simply the way things were.

This was, of course, a small boy's perspective, clouded now by the intervening years. Nevertheless, that schoolyard was a microcosm of a situation that still prevails in much of the world today, divided as we are into national, racial, and religious groups, with ethnic strife proliferating in the ashes of the Soviet Union, the Balkans riven by national hatred, and Los Angeles simmering with racial tension. The urgent question is how, if ever, we can hope to transcend the entrenched and seemingly "natural" boundaries of family, clan, tribe, nation, race, and creed. Put another way, what is the persuasive basis for the doctrine of universal human rights, rights that pertain to all human beings, regardless of national, racial, or religious affiliation?

I am not sure that I can answer this question in the course of this short essay, or indeed that I know of a fully convincing answer to give. But perhaps I can at least gesture in the direction where I think the answer lies, by offering some reflections on the contrasting approaches of two thinkers: Vaclav Havel, the playwright, essayist, advocate of human rights, and former President of Czechoslovakia; and Henri Bergson, the once influential French philosopher and apostle of creative evolution, now largely forgotten and ignored.

Let me begin with a story recounted by Vaclav Havel in his luminous essay, "Politics and Conscience" (*Havel* 1989, first written in 1984). He tells the story far better than I ever could, so I will simply recite it in his own words:

> As a boy, I lived for some time in the country and I clearly remember an experience from those days: I used to walk to school in a nearby village along a cart track through the fields and, on the way, see on the horizon a huge smokestack of some hurriedly built factory, in all likelihood in the service of war. It spewed dense brown smoke and scattered it across the sky. Each time I saw it, I had an intense sense of something profoundly wrong, of humans soiling the heavens. I have no idea whether there was something like a science of ecology in those days; if there was, I certainly knew nothing of it. Still that 'soiling the heavens' offended me spontaneously. It seemed to me that, in it, humans are guilty of something, that they destroy something important, arbitrarily disrupting the natural order of things, and that such things cannot go unpunished (Ibid, p. 136).

In this deceptively casual manner, Havel introduces us to the main point of his essay. We have, he argues, lost touch with the "natural world", a phrase that he vests with a particular meaning. In ordinary parlance, the "natural world" usually refers to material reality as portrayed by science. For Havel, it is something quite different. It is the world of familiar personal life, the world of the small child and the medieval peasant, the world of all who have not grown alienated from their actual lived experience:

> the world which has its morning and its evening, its *down* (the earth) and its *up* (the heavens), where the sun rises daily in the east, traverses the sky and sets in the west, and where concepts like 'at home' and 'in foreign parts', good and evil, beauty and ugliness, near and far, duty and work, still mean something living and definite. ... Our 'I' primordially attests to that world and personally certifies it; that is the world of our lived experience, a world not yet indifferent since we are personally bound to it in our love, hatred, respect, contempt, tradition, in our interests and in that pre-reflective meaningfulness from which culture is born. ... In this world, categories like justice, honour, treason, friendship, infidelity, courage or empathy have a wholly tangible content, relating to actual persons and important for actual life. At the basis of this world are values which are simply there, perennially, before we ever speak of them, before we reflect upon them and inquire about them. It owes its internal coherence to something like a 'pre-speculative' assumption that the world functions and is generally possible at all only because there is something beyond its horizon, something beyond or above it that might escape our understanding and our grasp but, for just that reason, firmly grounds this world, bestows upon it its order and measure, and is the hidden source of all the rules, customs, commandments, prohibitions and norms that hold within it. The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd and superfluous, and which we can only guietly respect (Ibid, p. 137).

For Havel, then, the natural world has three basic elements, which are bound together. There is the "I", the person who experiences the natural world, who testifies to its verity, who feels the emotions it evokes, who strives to fulfill or evade his responsibilities, who is attracted or repelled by others, who makes his way through a familiar social landscape. Then, there is the "world", the actual object of our experience. In Havel's thinking, the world is not a pallid, inert mass which the individual vests with subjective meaning and colour. It comes fully-formed, drenched with value and significance, presuming upon our interest and involvement, demanding our allegiance. It is the world of family, neighbours, fellow-citizens, friends and enemies, the world of traditions and practices, of communal roles and attachments, of ways of doing and ways of seeing. Finally, to complete the trilogy, there is the unknowable "absolute", which delimits and grounds the world and validates its internal constitution. The absolute gives rise to fundamental values that precede the world experienced and underpin its norms and traditions. While remaining mysterious and inexplicable, the absolute paradoxically serves to explain and authenticate the world of lived experience.

Many of us, says Havel, have lost touch with the natural world, seduced by the scientific rationalism that pervades modern culture. For the rationalist, the natural world of lived experience is nothing but a realm of subjective whim and fancy, a prison-house of shadow and illusion. Rationalism calls on us to break through the walls of this prison to reach the clear, illuminated space of objective reality, as established by the impersonal methods of modern science.

So while the three pillars of the natural world are the "person", the "life-world" and the "absolute", scientific rationalism proposes to eliminate all

three and to substitute a single, homogeneous material reality, which is drained of all human or transcendent significance. In this world, the small child running through the fields, the cart-track, the growing crops, the school-house, the nearby village, are all of no more (or less) instrinsic value than the smokestack ejecting a dark cloud of particles into the sky. Whatever significance they appear to have is just a subjective illusion, a transitory flickering of line and colour on a blank screen. That the experience of reality necessarily involves a participant, that there are inherent limits to human knowledge, that the world is shot through with intrinsic meaning and value, that there is a mysterious natural order that commands our humility and respect, are all in principle denied.

Paralleling the spirit of scientific rationalism is a political philosophy fathered by Machiavelli that views politics as the rational technology of power. The ruler or politician, understood as a person with a conscience and a higher mandate, is ousted and replaced by an impersonal bureaucracy, blandly calculating the greatest good of the greatest number, with no sense of personal responsibility or absolute moral limits. Citizens with an individual stake in their community are transformed into an undifferentiated mass, to be "consulted", and "followed", but also cajoled, bribed, treatened, and manipulated. While this tendency reached its apogee in the totalitarian regimes of the East, says Havel, it is but a culmination of the rationalistic spirit emanating from Western Europe itself, which eats like an acid at the foundations of its own political structures.

Now Havel does not want us to eliminate smokestacks, abandon modern science and technology, or revert to medieval attitudes. The fault does not lie with science itself, which by a curious turn of events has rediscovered the personal element in the course of its "objective" inquiries into the sub-atomic world. The fault lies with the arrogance of man in the scientific age. "Man simply is not God, and playing God has cruel consequences." (Ibid, p. 142). What, then, are we to do in the face of a rationalism that bleaches any meaning from the cosmos and a politics that substitutes a calculus of power for personal conscience? In Havel's view, the shared task before us, both in East and West, is this:

> We must draw our standards from our natural world, heedless of ridicule, and reaffirm its denied validity. We must honour with the humility of the wise the bounds of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence; relating ever again to the absolute horizon of our existence which, if we but will, we shall constantly rediscover and experience; making values and imperatives into the starting point of all our acts, of all our personally attested, openly contemplated and ideologically uncensored lived experience. We must trust the voice of our conscience more than that of all abstract speculations and not invent other responsibilities than the one to which the voice calls us. We must not be ashamed that we are capable of love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy and tolerance, but just the opposite: we must

> set these fundamental dimensions of our humanity free from their 'private' exile and accept them as the only genuine starting point of meaningful human community. We must be guided by our own reason and serve the truth under all circumstances as our own essential experience (Ibid, pp. 153-154).

This, then, is a bare and inadequate summary of the themes developed by Havel in his essay. Let us accept for the moment his thesis that is it only within the natural world that we may find the values, principles, and basic verities that connect us with the absolute and provide the essential grounds for authentic understanding and action. What we have to consider is whether this thesis raises difficulties for modern doctrines of human rights, which Havel also espouses. For, as my story about the schoolyard illustrates, the natural world of lived experience, which has its "up" and "down", also has its "us" and "others", its "native-born" and "foreigners", its "civilized" and "barbarians", its "faithful" and "infidels".

More precisely, the question is as follows. How can the sort of "local knowledge" which Havel champions ever give rise to a universal doctrine of human rights? Throughout history, the distinction between in-groups and out-groups has been basic to most human societies. Traditionally, the natural world was a world in which people's rights and duties were determined primarily by the socially-defined roles that they played, whether as wife, husband, mother, father, daughter, son, sister, brother, clansman, neighbour, villager, citizen, and so on. Among these, the role of the "outsider" had a special significance. While it was common in many societies for visiting foreigners to be treated with courtesy and respect (so long as they were not considered enemies), it was also common for them to lack the rights held by locals. As an acute observer remarks of the attitude still prevalent in a remote Andalusian town after the Second World War:

> The stranger, as in Ancient Greece where he was protected by Zeus, enjoys a special status. It is a duty to assist him, for the reputation of the pueblo is felt to be at stake in his eyes. The visitor of wealth or standing is treated with great courtesy and hospitality. He is probably invited to a glass of wine in the *casino*, the club. People inquire what brings him and put themselves at his disposal.
>
> This standard of hospitality is a very noble feature of the Spanish people, yet its analysis would not be complete if one were not to point out that it is also a means whereby the community defends itself against outside interference. For a guest is a person who, while he must be entertained and cherished, is dependent upon the goodwill of his hosts. He has no rights and he can make no demands. On the other hand, the good name of the pueblo is his protection. For the sake of that, the members of the community prevent one another from taking advantage of him (*Pitt-Rivers* 1971, pp. 26-27).

By contrast, human-rights doctrines are characterized by their universality, by the fact that they attribute basic rights to all individuals, regardless of their status, roles, or membership in a given society. A person can be an outlaw to all societies, as some terrorists are today, and yet still possess rights to

fair and humane treatment. Arguably, doctrines of such universal scope can only be generated by precisely that sort of detached reasoning that Havel regrets, by an approach that prescinds from all local knowledge, that turns its back on the natural world with its status-based distinctions and engages in theorizing of the most abstract kind. To sharpen the point, not only does it seem difficult to attain a universal viewpoint from a footing in the natural world, but such a viewpoint is apparently hostile to an essential feature of the natural world: its closed and inward-looking character.

What may seem puzzling, then, about Havel's approach is his coupling of "the personal" with "the absolute", his insistence that it is precisely personal experience of a pre-reflective sort that discloses to us the existence of the absolute in all its mystery. We often assume that the realm of the personal lies at the other extreme from the realm of the absolute — if any such thing exists at all. For the personal is unique to each of us as particular human beings and so varies from one individual to another. But the absolute, as ordinarily understood, is universal and unchanging. How then can the outlook of a particular individual, which is necessarily idiosyncratic, serve to disclose the absolute?

This puzzle has a second dimension. Havel maintains that the absolute harbours a range of fundamental values that inform and explain the norms and social arrangements of the natural world. These same basic values, he implies, provide the grounds for universal human rights. Yet there is a clear tension between such rights and the outlook of particular societies and groups, notably in their attitude to "outsiders". It is the introverted nature of ethnic and religious groups and their exclusive sense of community that fuel the fires of mutual animosity. If the natural world of group identity is not transcended, it seems we are doomed to unceasing communal distrust and strife. Is it not naive, then, for Havel to suppose that universal human rights are somehow grounded in the natural world?

Here we should remark on the existence of two broad schools of thought. The first school holds that there are a limitless number of natural moral worlds thrown up by social groups in the course of history. These worlds differ in important ways from one another, notably in the degree to which they respect basic human rights. However, there is no objective basis for judging the worth of one natural world over another or for criticizing its attitudes and practices. We may favour one system over another or hold that a system should be reformed in some manner. But that is simply a matter of subjective preference, as molded by our upbringing and experience. The doctrine of universal human rights is just another product of a natural moral world, if not a dessicated intellectual construct. Objectively, it is no better (or worse) than any other view.

A rival school of thought maintains, to the contrary, that there exists a set of absolute values and moral principles that can be ascertained and justified on a purely rational basis. Exponents of this viewpoint differ among themselves as to the character of the values and principles in question and their mode of justification. But they agree that some such entities can be discovered by reflective reason and that they provide the basis for the doctrine of universal human rights (see, for example: *Finnis* 1980; *Gewirth* 1978). This school views human rights doctrine, then, as "external" to all natural worlds, both in origin and justification. Indeed, this feature is a great virtue of the doctrine, because it allows us to assess and criticize objectively conventional moral attitudes and arrangements.

Now, Havel's approach does not conform to either school of thought. On the one hand, he clearly believes in the existence of absolute values that transcend particular natural worlds, and so he denies a central tenet of the first school. On the other hand, he doubts that these values are accessible by the kind of abstract, speculative reasoning favoured by exponents of the second school. Rather, he seems to favour a third approach, one that combines and transforms the insights of the other schools.

This approach concedes to the cultural relativist that reason alone does not give us direct access to absolute moral principles and values that "float" in a moral space isolated from the natural worlds of particular societies. However, at the same time, it agrees with the absolutist that moral practices and outlooks are not purely conventional or arbitrary. It reconciles these views in the following manner. The significance and value of particular moral rules, it argues, can only be judged from within the natural world of a definite social system and not from outside. The "external" viewpoint is in principle wrong (or right only insofar as it is an "internal" viewpoint in disguise). But, secondly, a given social system of rules and practices points beyond itself to basic values and principles that transcend that system and provide a basis for both understanding and assessing it. These transcendent values and principles exist in some absolute sense, even if their status and origin be utterly mysterious. Our surest knowledge of them (for most people, at any rate) is gained by encountering them in the concrete nexus of ordinary social relations.

According to this view, the capacity to understand socially-ordained rules and to apply them in concrete situations requires the ability to grasp the point of such rules and the basic values and principles that they serve. Many important social rules, whether legal or moral, do not prescribe rigid forms of behaviour in clearly delineated situations. A rule of such specificity as that requiring a man to remove his hat in church is hardly the norm. But even in such a case we may have to know something about the rule's purpose in order

to apply it (does a wayside shrine constitute a "church"?), or to decide when it may safely be ignored (does a fireman have to take off his helmet, or a construction worker doff his hard-hat?). The same observation applies with greater force to legal rules that are more general in character, such as the basic principles that one should honour one's promises and refrain from doing harm to others. These principles are not only protean in their implications, they often ordain quite different behaviour in only slightly different contexts. To apply them in ordinary life demands a wide-ranging and subtle knowledge of the community and its assemblage of rules and practices, as well as, a firm grasp of the basic values that the principles serve. These values transcend the natural moral world of the community and have the constant potential to reshape it from within, like yeast in a batch of dough.

So, in positing a strong connection between the personal and the absolute, Havel seems to maintain that the world of transcendent values can only be attained by means of insights, understandings, and qualities gained through immersion in a natural moral world. For it is only in the context of particular situations arising within a definite social order that we are able to encounter transcendent values at work. Havel's essay serves as a reproach, then, to the kind of abstract moral reasoning that is ostensibly divorced from any particular social context, be it cultural, legal, or moral.

If this is a plausible interpretation of Havel's views, it is not the only one. His work does not pretend to be systematic and, like all good literature, operates on multiple levels. So, when we look more closely at the meaning of the "personal" in his thought, it proves to be more complex than first appears. A distinction needs to be drawn between the aspect of the personal which is deeply rooted in the socially-engendered world of everyday life and, on the other hand, that aspect which rests on individual insight, intuition and experience, which is less beholden to conventional social attitudes and may in some cases be strongly at odds with them.

Havel does not always distinguish clearly between these two aspects of the personal world. At times, he seems to be talking about a socially-engendered world, as when he refers to "all the rules, customs, commandments, prohibitions and norms" that prevail in the natural world, or holds out the example of the traditional family farm: "rooted in the nature of its place, appropriate, harmonious, personally tested by generations of farmers and certified by the results of their husbandry" (*Havel* 1989, pp. 137 and 139). On other occasions, he appears to have in mind intensely individual insights and intuitions, as when he calls for a politics growing from the heart and urges us to trust the voice of conscience (Ibid, pp. 157 and 153).

Havel is, of course, alive to the fact that conscience may bring a person into conflict with conventional social attitudes. He confesses, in another

essay, that there is a "trace of the heroic dreamer, something mad and unrealistic" in the dissident's perspective. He speaks of the dissident's need to shake off the fear that he will become the "target for his sober neighbours' ridicule" and the feeling that he is losing a grip on real life and drifting up into the "stratospheric realm of fairy tales" (*Havel* 1989a, p. 192), Yet, while Havel acknowledges the possibility of such conflicts, he does not give them particular prominence in this context or consider their broader significance.

Nevertheless, Havel speaks to us, not simply as the essayist, but also as the public dissident, the defender of basic human rights, the man imprisoned for his beliefs. We attend not only to his words as they appear on the printed page but also to the acts and experiences that lie behind those words and give them depth and credibility. This personal dimension is characteristic of Havel's writing, a deep current that flows silently beneath the surface of his work, occasionally breaking through and surprising us with its force. Thus, following a passage of passionate rhetoric, he remarks wryly: "I know all that sounds very general, very indefinite and very unrealistic, but I assure you that these apparently naive words stem from a very concrete and not always easy experience with the world and, if I may say so, *I know what I am talking about*" (*Havel* 1989a, p. 154, emphasis added). These are the words, not of the comfortable family man, the village farmer, the worker immersed in a daily routine. They are the words of the exile, the person isolated from everything that brings meaning to ordinary life, the man silenced and confined for his views. So, when Havel appeals for a return to home truths, he speaks with the distinctive accents of the desert.

On this point, it is worth comparing Havel's approach with that of Henri Bergson. In his last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935; first published 1932), Bergson drew a sharp contrast between what he termed the "closed" society and the "open" society. The closed society is any society, however large or small, however "civilized" or "primitive", which excludes some people from its ranks and includes others, which draws a boundary around itself and contrasts its members with outsiders, which contemplates war against other groups as an instrument of national policy. The open society, by contrast, is the society which has no limits, which extends to the whole of humanity. It is the society envisaged by the doctrine of universal human rights, a society which does not privilege the members of any group over others, which posits the essential equality and fraternity of all human beings (Ibid, esp. pp. 22-25, 255-256).

Bergson argues against the easy supposition that we can proceed from the closed to the open society by degrees, by a gradual enlargement of our sympathies and attachments. There is, he says, a difference of kind and not merely of degree to be bridged. The closed society, however large it may be, is sus-

tained by an inner dynamic of exclusiveness. It achieves and maintains social cohesion by a posture of tacit hostility or at least alert self-defence vis-a-vis other societies. He reminds us of the deep satisfaction people draw from their membership in exclusive groups and clubs, their ingrained tendency to base their sense of personal integrity and self-worth on such membership (Ibid, pp. 23-25, 44-45, 58-59). His words call to mind the recent remarks of a hockey player facing suspension for deliberately assaulting an opponent during a game. He did not care, he said, what the authorities might do, what the media might write, what the fans might say. He knew his team supported what he did. That was all he cared about.

The open society, says Bergson, can only be achieved by a radical break with the forces sustaining the closed society. This rupture can only be accomplished by a great soul, a mystic or a prophet, someone who reimmerses himself in the creative force that is the well-spring of all life and reemerges with a vision of the essential unity of all human beings. Such a person is so different from the normal run of humanity as to constitute virtually a new species. But we would be in no position to heed the call of the mystic were it not for the fact that his call finds an echo in the souls of ordinary people. Through this innate sympathy, we can be brought to feel the truth of what the mystic says, even though we could never have discovered this truth for ourselves (Ibid, pp. 26-27, 41-42, 46-49, 75-76).

Mystical experience, then, lies at the heart of the doctrine of universal human rights. Reason, of course, comes along later and constructs philosophies explaining and justifying the doctrine. But reason could never have accomplished this task unaided, and the arguments it constructs are powerless in themselves to persuade those who proceed from different premises or heed a different call. What force such arguments possess is borrowed from the passionate insights of the saint, the mystic, the prophet, — in Havel's terms, the heroic dreamer.

Bergson perhaps contrasts too strongly the closed society and the open and insists too strenously on the impossibility of passing from the one to the other by a process of gradual enlargement. For, as suggested earlier, the rules of any natural moral world are comprehensible only in terms of the transcendent values and principles they embody and serve, and these values always have the potential to transform the established moral system. Our concrete experience with such values in the small exchanges of daily life is what prepares us for their application in a realm beyond experience. Someone who has never known actual fraternity can have little affinity for the doctrine of universal brotherhood. (For more on this, see *Slattery* 1991.)

Nevertheless, Bergson seems right in emphasizing the unique role of prophets: that rag-tag band of "mystics and saints, obscure heroes of moral

life whom we have met on our way and who are in our eyes the equals of the greatest ..." (*Bergson* 1935, p. 42). His observations bring us back to Havel's remarks on the influence of the "dissident":

> ... a single, seemingly powerless person who dares to cry out the word of truth and to stand behind it with all his person and all his life, ready to pay a high price, has, surprisingly, greater power, though formally disfranchised, than do thousands of anonymous voters. It is becoming evident that even in today's world, and especially on this exposed rampart where the wind blows most sharply, it is possible to oppose personal experience and the natural world to the 'innocent' power and to unmask its guilt, as the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* has done (*Havel* 1989, p. 156).

This passage is so close to themes enunciated by Bergson as to be remarkable. Yet there are interesting differences between the two thinkers. Whereas Bergson's work calls up the image of the man of the desert, the solitary "outsider" possessed by a daemon, driven by a force beyond him, Havel more often evokes the man immersed in a community of family and friends, with deep roots in the farm, the work-place, the neighbourhood, natural surroundings. Perhaps, however, this is just a difference of emphasis, to be explained by the varying contexts in which the two men wrote. For Havel, the natural world is the only possible well-spring of truth in a totalitarian society where all public institutions are committed to perpetuating untruths. For Bergson, writing in France during the early thirties, the traditional image of the prophet subsisting on locusts in the wilds is more apt; to invoke the comfortable world of daily life would carry overtones of "conventional" society, which stands in contrast to the prophet's vision.

Still, the difference in approach is useful and important, with each view serving to complement the other. As Bruce Hutchison reminds us, it is not only in the forest, but also in the intimate world of children and dogs that the absolute may be encountered. There is a mysticism of the hearth, as well as, of the mountaintop. In other words, both the rootedness of communal life and the dislocation of exile have their roles to play. Rootedness teaches us the difference between "up" and "down". Dislocation intimates that up is not always up, and down not always down. Rootedness speaks of the bonds uniting us and distinguishes "us" from "others". Dislocation whispers that the others are also us. Rootedness is the view from the kitchen window: the grape vine in the arbour, the spreading pear tree, the child digging happily in the earth. Dislocation is the sight of a strange constellation in an alien sky.

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